

New-Canadian Series No. 1

SASKATCHEWAN

# FROM POLISH PEASANT TO CANADIAN CITIZEN

*A true story of what Saskatchewan Schools  
are doing for the New-Canadians.*

ISSUED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF  
THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

REGINA:  
J. W. REID, King's Printer.  
1920



## A MESSAGE TO THE BOYS AND GIRLS OF SASKATCHEWAN

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Saskatchewan is one of the young provinces of the Dominion but the rapid strides made during the period since its birth in 1905, justify us all in being exceedingly optimistic as to the future. As is the case with every new country we have manifold problems facing solution. The fullest development and the height of progress cannot be reached until we have a large population, working in harmony, unison and co-operation for the attainment of these ends. Our total population according to the census of 1916 is 647,835. Of these 353,098 are classed as British (English, Irish, Scotch and Welsh); 32,066 French; 2,521 Belgian; 59,302 Austro-Hungarian (including Austrian, Bukovinian, Galician Hungarian and Ruthenian); 8,931 Dutch; 4,030 Jewish; 26,977 Norwegian; 29,126 Russian; 16,398 Swedish and over forty other nationalities are represented.

Some of these people cannot speak the English language but the vast majority are anxious to have their children educated and are sending them regularly to our schools. In order to stimulate even greater interest in the work of our schools this story of a bright young Polish boy who came from Austria in 1905 and started school in Saskatchewan in 1908, and who now holds a B.A. degree from the University of Saskatchewan, is being distributed. Many others have met with similar success and I trust that every boy and girl who reads this story will be spurred on to greater effort in order better to become fitted creditably to take his or her place as a loyal and patriotic citizen of our great province.

*W. M. Martin.*

*Minister of Education.*

## From Polish Peasant to Canadian Citizen

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It is a long way from a little Austrian village snugly resting on a grassy slope of the Carpathian mountains, to the fertile prairie lands of Canada. It is a great change from a neatly painted little cottage in Galicia to a sod shack in Saskatchewan. It is a still longer step from a seat in a little Austrian school house to a place in the graduating class of the University of Saskatchewan.

About fifteen years ago John Niemczyk, a Pole, emigrated to Canada from Austria and settled in north-eastern Saskatchewan, where he took up a homestead. A low, sod-roofed mud "shack" was built, and the newcomer with his wife and family of seven children settled down to lay the foundation of a new Canadian home. The struggle was hard for a few years. No member of the family knew a word of English, but the eldest son, Louis, then a robust lad of eight or nine, soon manifested a disposition to learn the new language. There was no school in the district, and the boy made little progress. After about five years other settlers came, and a school was opened. Louis was then about fourteen years of age. The teacher was a young Canadian, who entered heart and soul into the work of teaching English to half a hundred foreign children, the majority of whom knew absolutely nothing of the language.

The young Polish lad attended regularly and made rapid progress in his studies. After two years he had advanced sufficiently to enter a high school. During the next summer, owing to the scarcity of qualified teachers, he was granted a permit to teach school in a non-English district. This he did with marked success, and in the fall he returned to high school. The following summer he was successful in passing part of the examinations for a third class teacher's diploma, and the next year he completed the work for this certificate. Several months were then spent in attendance at a normal school. After another year's successful experience, he pursued studies

leading to university entrance, and obtained his junior matriculation with a most creditable showing. Another year was spent in teaching in a Ruthenian settlement, after which he entered the provincial university, where he began work on a course leading to degrees in Arts and Agriculture.

After graduating from the public school, he decided that in order to obtain a high school education, and at the same time assist his parents in erecting a new home he must practise rigid economy. With this end in view he purchased a small lot on the outskirts of the town of Yorkton, and here built a "shack." In this humble dwelling he lived simply during his life at high school, doing his own housework and even baking his own bread. But this was not all. For two winters he kept with him a younger brother and sister, whom he looked after in order that they, too, might obtain the educational advantages afforded by the public schools of the town. This story of thrift, perseverance and conquest may best be told in Louis' own words:

"I was born on the 17th of July, 1893, in a densely populated section of Austria called Trzynietz. This district is situated on the banks of the Olsa River, near the Beskiden Mountains, which separates the northern boundary of Hungary from East Silesia.

"In this busy centre I spent my first nine years, enjoying the beautiful mountainous scenery, the blossoming fruit trees, the singing of birds, and the busy hum of bees. Not far to the north, high draught chimneys towered over large structures, where the smelting of iron ore, the making of railway rails, and the production of enamel-ware provided occupation for the people. The heaving, hissing, puffing, and groaning of the powerful machines by day could be heard for miles around, while the nights were constantly illuminated by the reflection from the huge furnaces.

"My public school education began when I was not quite six years old. The first year of my school life was very pleasant and interesting, because I was learning something about the elementary subjects in my maternal language, which was Polish. I had mastered probably the most difficult stage of my work, when my father

became greatly interested in the widespread emigration to Canada. It was true that he was facing a serious problem. However, the letters from Canada, which he received from his countrymen, told him of a land where justice and liberty abounded. He worked in a factory and wished to escape the heel of oppression. He desired to break away from the landlordism, militarism, and high taxation. He longed to bring his family of seven to a land of freedom and greater opportunities. His desire became so strong that he finally decided to leave for the New World.

"In 1903, in the early spring, we started out on the long voyage in search of a new home. After a month of dreary journeying we reached our destination, which was Yorkton, Saskatchewan. This little prairie town was a lonesome, dreary looking place in comparison with what I was accustomed to see. The late spring, the chilly atmosphere, and the absence of fruit trees grieved us all. Yet in spite of all this, my father cheerfully located a homestead about twenty-five miles southwest of this point, and in a short time a little "shack" stood in the wilderness. Day after day passed by and we saw only a lonely hawk, or a prowling prairie wolf, but no sign of man. Gradually we forgot the hardships, though they were always present, and determined to accept the new conditions as cheerfully as possible. Occasionally I accompanied my father when he drove to town, and assisted him in purchasing provisions. Oh! how I longed to be able to converse in English! I made use of a Polish dictionary, but my pronunciation was far different from what it should have been. On many occasions I could not make myself understood, and was only laughed at. The organisation of a school district in our settlement was very slow, on account of the ignorance of the people and the scarcity of English teachers. Finally my wish was fulfilled. A school house was built and an English teacher was secured.

"My primary school work in English commenced when I was fourteen years old. The attitude of the teacher towards his work, his method in teaching, and his strong personality stimulated in me a desire to continue the school work. Being under his influence for

one year and a half, I obtained an excellent elementary knowledge of the English language. Now, I had a foundation to begin studies in the Regina training school, which was an inferior branch of the provincial normal school.

"After having attended during two winter sessions, I was fortunate enough in obtaining the equivalent to grade eight standing, and during the summer was permitted to take charge of a certain remote rural school. This was really a great advantage to me in securing the necessary financial assistance which I always lacked.

"The following year I was in a position to commence high school work at Yorkton, and succeeded in obtaining the third class, part I academic certificate. As soon as the school session ended, I had the pleasure of teaching in a Bukovinian settlement near Theodore. The time passed rapidly, as I was intensely interested in teaching these children to speak English. After five months, I was again at Yorkton, planning my future school life. Consequently, I decided to build a "shack" on a lot of my own. For a considerable time I was busy hammering, cooking, studying and attending high school quite regularly. I now had a shelter of my own. I worked at everything cheerfully, and was well rewarded for carrying out my duties by passing my examinations for the second part of the third class teacher's certificate. The next year I obtained the teacher's third class professional license at the Yorkton normal school, and I secured a position in Homeland district, near the village of MacNutt. After having taught for eight months, I was able to finance a further course at the high school, and began to struggle with the subjects of the second class and junior matriculation, which I mastered in eight months. Then I packed up my books, dishes, and the necessary school equipment, and took charge of Folkstone school, which had an enrolment of forty children of Ruthenian parentage.

"There I spent fourteen months in teaching English to the non-Anglo-Saxon boys and girls, and stimulating the young and old, who took part in concerts, picnics and entertainments. During the winter months I conducted a night school, where many of the adult members

of the community were taught to speak, read, and write English. A young people's society was formed and concerts arranged for in order to aid in patriotic purposes."

This is Louis' story—truly one that should prove an inspiration to every Canadian boy and girl. He has overcome every obstacle and now holds his B.A. degree, and what is more important is a worthy citizen of Canada.

What a splendid record of obstacles encountered and overcome, of worthy ambition, of loyal self-sacrifice, and youthful devotion to duty in the pursuance of a grand ideal! For Louis' ideal is to equip himself in order that he may be the better enabled to ameliorate the social conditions under which too many of his fellow-countrymen now live. Nor is it extravagant to assert that there are others of this young Canadian's calibre who are consecrating their lives, in a greater or less degree, to the same noble task.